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To: Vicki Crosby, News-Miner, 459-7546 (wk), 452-7917 (fax), people@newsmener.com
From: Roxie Dinstel via Ronda Boswell
Re: Pinching Pennies to run Mondays on page A-3
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Vitamins, supplements and herbal remedies are a multimillion-dollar business in the U.S. In 2006, we spent over $22 million on these remedies and some people who are considered heavy users (using four or more supplements) spend up to $576 on supplements during the year. A bulletin from Colorado State University Extension notes that 68 percent of all Americans use some type of supplement.

That is a chunk of money that we should examine. I’m not going to tackle the idea of using supplements; that is a personal decision between you and your doctor. However, how do you know that you are getting what you are paying for?

Vitamins and supplements are viewed as a magic way to get all the nutrients you need. But the body is a complex organism that needs certain nutrients and, sometimes, certain combinations of nutrients to do the most good. We need 42 nutrients each day, including vitamins, minerals, proteins and fats. These nutrients must be present in certain amounts to support the functioning of the body. In addition, fruits and vegetables have phytochemicals (lycopene, quercetin and beta-carotene) that contribute to the diet. Multivitamins are great to fill in the gaps in your diet, but they can’t replace foods. Some people are better off spending the money currently spent on multivitamins on purchasing nutrient-dense foods, such as fruits and vegetables.

At the center of this controversy is the actual makeup of these vitamins and minerals. Any vitamin that has more than one nutrient is considered a multivitamin. There is no legal formula for what is in it. In 2006, the University of Hawaii conducted a study on multivitamins and found that of the 26,000 people in the study, they were taking supplements with over 1,200 different formulas. Just like I always tell you about foods, learn to read the labels to make sure you know what you are paying for.

Be particularly careful of vitamins that offer more than 100 percent of the daily value of any nutrient. Nutrients that aren’t used up each day are the problem. Some are stored in the body (fat soluble) and some are passed on through. The fat-soluble nutrients build up and many of these can be toxic over time. Don’t choose a multivitamin that has massive amounts of vitamins and minerals. Look for those that have no more than 100 percent of any vitamin or mineral.
I’ve also heard a lot of controversy about natural and synthetic vitamins. The body doesn’t recognize if vitamins are from a natural or a synthetic source. There is also no difference between absorption of vitamins/minerals from food sources or from multivitamins.

When you buy that multivitamin, how do you know what is in it? Read the label, but there is no guarantee that what you are reading is what is really in the bottle. Consumer Reports took a look at the labels and compared them to what was in the actual pill and found that many labels didn’t tell the truth. One even had measurable levels of lead.

How can you protect yourself from fakes and dangerous formulas? Look for a label from Consumer Lab or the U.S. Pharmacopeia (USP) that tells you that the vitamin has both the nutrients listed in the quantity listed on the label and that they will dissolve in the body. These are not a guarantee of the effectiveness of the multivitamin, but just that it is what it says it is. Some larger companies do their own quality testing, so either look for a well-known brand or the quality label from one of these testing companies.

The best way to make sure you are getting all the nutrients you need is to eat a well-balanced diet. Multivitamins can be a good stopgap when you are missing a few nutrients, but don’t rely on them to provide all your nutrients. Be sure to read the label for nutritional content and look for a quality testing seal on the label.

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